

obedient to the psychological requirements imposed by memory and the story form, it is couched in the contingent, dealing with actions and actors, not abstractions and principles. Havelock argues that this kind of discourse, since it is the only form of speech in the culture that enjoys a certain autonomy and preservation, represents "the limits within which the mind of the members of that culture can express itself, the degree of sophistication to which they can attain" (p. 182).

Havelock argues—along the same lines, in fact, as Plato did—that the teller of tales and his audience were under a "spell." The epic poet was under the spell of the epic rhythm created by meter and recurrent themes; the hearer in fully identifying with the telling of the tale also entered the spell. The epic was an acting out of, an identification with, the values and beliefs of the society. Innovation in values and ideas was difficult—the cost of giving up what one has memorized and memorizing anew was too great.

As we saw in the last chapter, Plato, one of the first great writers of Greek civilization, sought to reorder Greek society, to relocate power. To do so he had to break the power of the epic poet ("Homer"), because in his care resided the moral and intellectual heritage of society. No surprise then that in Plato's "perfect" society, described in *The Republic*, he excludes poets ("Homer").

What woke the Greeks? Havelock's answer: alphabetic-script literacy, a changed technology of communication. Refreshment of memory through written signs enabled a reader to dispense with most of that emotional identification by which alone the acoustic record was sure of recall. This could release psychic energy, for a review and rearrangement of what had now been written down. What had been written could be seen as an object (a "text") and not just heard and felt. You could, as it were, take a second look.

When Socrates asked the poets what their poems said:

The poets are his victims because in their keeping reposes the Greek cultural tradition, the fundamental "thinking" (we can use this word in only a non-Platonic sense) of the Greeks in moral, social and historical matters. Here was the tribal encyclopedia, and to ask what it was saying amounted to a demand that it be said differently, non-poetically, non-rhythmically, and non-imaginatively. What Plato is pleading for could be shortly put as the invention of an abstract language of descriptive science to replace a concrete language of oral memory.

(p. 209)

Read from "Literacy:
a great divide" to "Literacy"
and higher order
cognitive skills."
Pg. 70-76

Gee, J.P. (2008) *Social
Linguistics and Literacies:
Ideology in discourses* (3rd ed.)
London: Routledge.

Literacy: a great divide?

Lévi-Strauss's work raises, without answering, the question as to how cultures move from the science of the concrete to the science of the abstract, and through which stages. Two influential pieces of work have suggested that the answer is literacy: Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (1963; see also Havelock 1982, 1986) and Jack Goody's *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977; see also 1968, 1988). I will discuss Havelock first (all page references below are to Havelock 1963).

Havelock argues that Homeric Greek culture was an oral (nonliterate) culture. His characterization of that culture has been used both as a characterization of oral cultures generally and as a cornerstone in the argument that it is literacy that makes for a "great divide" between human cultures and their ways of thinking.

The Greek oral epic—such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in their original forms—was a storehouse of social directives, an "encyclopedia of conduct" in the form of contrived and memorized speech. It was the way the culture passed down its values and knowledge. Havelock argues that the epic took the form it did due to the demands of human memory in the absence of writing. It was recited with a heavy metrical rhythm and constructed out of a large set of pre-given, memorized formulas (short phrases that would fit the meter), as well as a large set of pre-given motifs (stereotypical characters, actions and events) and wider themes which recurred throughout the epic (Finnegan 1977, 1988; Foley 1988; Lord 1960; Parry 1971).

There was, however, scope for creativity in how these building blocks were arranged and ordered on any occasion of recitation; recitation was always sensitive to the reactions of the audience. This characterization reminds one of Lévi-Strauss's view of *bricolage* in mythic thought, which indeed is what the Homeric epics were.

Oral poetry constituted didactic entertainment, and if it ceased to entertain, it ceased to be effectively didactic. It was rhythm that underlay this pleasure, the rhythm of recurrent meter, formulas, motifs, and themes. Further, since knowledge in an oral culture is compelled to be

Thus, we have returned via Havelock's orality and literacy to something like Lévi-Strauss's contrast between the science of the concrete and the science of the abstract contrasted as two fundamentally different ways of knowing the world.

Literacy as "the domestication of the savage mind"

Jack Goody's *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977) moves beyond ancient Greek culture to modern nonliterate and semi-literate societies. He sees the development and spread of literacy as a crucial factor in explaining how modes of thought and cultural organization change over time.

Goody and Ian Watt (1963), in a now famous earlier paper, laid out some of the outcomes that they saw as linked to the advent of writing and in particular to the invention of the alphabetic system that made widespread literacy possible. They suggested that "logic," in the restricted sense of an instrument of analytic procedures, seemed to be a function of writing, since it was the setting down of speech that enabled humans clearly to separate words, to manipulate their order, to develop syllogistic forms of reasoning, and to perceive contradictions. With writing one could arrest the flow of speech and compare side by side utterances that had been made at different times and places.

Essentially, Goody's procedure is to take certain of the characteristics that Lévi-Strauss and others have regarded as marking the distinction between primitive and advanced cultures, and to suggest that many of the valid aspects of this distinction can be related to changes in the mode of communication, especially the introduction of various forms of writing. Goody relates the development of writing to the growth of individualism, the growth of bureaucracy and of more depersonalized and more abstract systems of government, as well as to the development of the abstract thought and syllogistic reasoning that culminate in modern science. Goody sees the acquisition of writing as effectively transforming the nature of both cognitive and social processes.

Of course, characteristics which Goody attributes to orality persist in societies with literacy. Indeed, this fact might well seem to undermine the case for the "intrinsic" effects of literacy. However, Goody appeals here to a claim that many people in such societies (like ours) have "restricted literacy" as against "full literacy." In fact, Goody comes close to suggesting that "restricted literacy" is the norm in almost all non-technological societies today, and, perhaps, in large pockets of modern technological ones as well.

Orality and literacy as two different worlds

The work of Havelock and Goody is translated into a sweeping philosophical, linguistic, and anthropological statement about orality and literacy as a great divide in human culture, thought, and history in Walter Ong's influential and entertaining book *Orality and Literacy* (1982).

Ong argues that work on oral and literate cultures has made us revise our understanding of human identity. Writing—commitment of the word to space—enlarges the potentiality of language "almost beyond measure" and "restructures thought":

Oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche. Nevertheless, without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials, cannot produce other beautiful and powerful creations. In this sense, orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing. Literacy, as will be seen, is absolutely necessary for the development not only of science but also history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself. There is hardly an oral culture or a predominantly oral culture left in the world today that is not somehow aware of the vast complex of powers forever inaccessible without literacy. This awareness is agony for persons rooted in primary orality, who want literacy passionately but who also know very well that moving into the exciting world of literacy means leaving behind much that is exciting and deeply loved in the earlier oral world. We have to die to continue living.

(pp. 14–15)

Ong goes on to offer a strongly stated characterization of thought and expression in oral cultures. But in doing so he makes a crucial move in claiming that "to varying degrees many cultures and subcultures, even in a high-technology ambience, preserve much of the mind-set of primary orality" (p. 11). And indeed many of the features he cites have been claimed to be characteristic of, for instance, lower-socioeconomic African-American culture in the United States. Many lower-socioeconomic African-American people in the United States still have ties to a former rich oral culture, both from the days of slavery in the United States and from African cultures, and are at the same time less influenced than mainstream middle-class groups by essay-text literacy and the school

systems that perpetuate it (Baugh 1983, 1999; Green 2002; Labov 1972a, b; Mufwene *et al.* 1998; Rickford and Rickford 2000; Smitherman 1977; Stucky 1987).

Ong goes on to claim that many modern cultures which have known writing for centuries have not fully interiorized it. He uses as examples Arabic culture and certain other Mediterranean cultures (e.g., ironically, after Havelock's work, including modern Greek culture). He also points out that oral habits of thought and expression, including massive use of formulaic elements of a type similar to those in Homer, still marked prose style of almost every sort in Tudor England some 2,000 years after Plato's campaign in writing against oral poets. Thus, the range of application of Ong's contrast between literacy and orality is greatly expanded by his inclusion of groups with what he refers to as "residual orality" on the oral side of the dichotomy.

Ong offers a set of features that characterize thought and expression in a primary oral culture. The first of these, expanding on Havelock, is "formulaic thought and expression," defined as "more or less exactly repeated set phrases or set expressions (such as proverbs)" (p. 26). Beyond formulaicness, Ong argues that thought and expression in an oral culture are (1) additive (strung together by additive relations like simple adjunction or terms/concepts like "and") rather than subordinative; (2) aggregative (elements of thought or expression come in clusters, e.g., not "the princess" but "the beautiful princess") rather than analytic; (3) redundant or "copious"; (4) conservative or traditionalist, inhibiting experimentation; (5) close to the human life world; (6) agonistically toned; (7) empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced; (8) situational rather than abstract.

Though Ong restricts these features to primary rather than residually oral cultures, it is striking how similar some of these features are to characterizations linguists have offered of the differences between speech and writing, educators have offered of the differences between "good" and "bad" writers, and sociolinguists have offered of differences between forms of (prosaic versus poetic) storytelling at school and in society at large (Bauman 1986; Bauman and Sherzer 1974; Michaels 1981).

Thus we get to one of the main implications of the Havelock-Goody-Ong line of work: in modern technological societies like the United States something akin to the oral-literate distinction may apply between groups with "residual orality" or "restricted literacy" (usually lower socioeconomic) and groups with full access to the literacy taught in the schools (usually middle and upper middle-class). Lévi-Strauss's recasting of the primitive-civilized distinction in terms of a contrast

between concrete and abstract thought, now explained by literacy, comes then to roost in our "modern" society.

Integration versus involvement, not literacy versus orality

The linguist Wally Chafe, in contrasting writing (essays) and speech (spontaneous conversation), suggests that differences in the processes of speaking and writing have led to specific differences in the products (Chafe 1985; see also Gee 2004; Tannen 1985). The fact that writing is much slower than speech, while speaking is much faster, allows written language to be less fragmented, more syntactically integrated, than speech. Writers have the time to mold their ideas into a more complex, coherent, integrated whole, making use of complicated lexical and syntactic devices seldom used in speech, such as heavy use of nominalizations, participles, attributive adjectives, and various subordinating devices (Halliday and Martin 1993).

In addition to its integrated quality, Chafe calls attention to the fact that written language fosters more detachment than speech, which is face-to-face and usually more highly socially involved than writing. Thus, writing is integrated and detached, while speech is fragmented and involved.

Chafe is aware that these are in reality poles of a continuum, and that there are uses of spoken and written language that do not fit these characterizations (e.g. lectures as a form of integrated and detached speech; letters as a form of fragmented and involved writing; literature, where involvement features are used for aesthetic effects). However, integration and detachment are part of the potential that writing offers, thanks to the processes by which it is produced.

It is interesting to note, however, that Richardson *et al.* (1983) argued that in many junior colleges in the United States, given the pervasiveness of multiple-choice tests and note taking, as well as ever present bureaucratic forms to fill out, and a lack of essay writing or discursive exams, literacy has become fragmented, but socially detached. Thus, it partakes of features of both speech (fragmentation) and writing (detachment) in Chafe's terms.

Furthermore, in many oral cultures, there are formal ritual-traditional uses of language that have many of the features of poetry (e.g., rhythm, repetition and syntactic parallelism), but which are also formal and detached (like much writing in our culture). Here, again, we see a case where we get features of both writing (detachment) and speech (in this case, poetry-like features).

As Chafe well knows, these mixed cases show us that the speech-writing or orality-literacy distinction is problematic. What is really involved is different cultural practices that in certain contexts call for certain uses of language, language patterned in certain ways and trading on features like integration/fragmentation and detachment/involvement (and, we might add, prose/poetry) to various degrees. It is better to study the features within their social practices than to stay at the level of writing versus speech. This is one of the major motifs of a contemporary socio-cultural approach to language and literacy.

Literacy and higher-order cognitive skills

The previous section suggests the need for a new approach to the oral-literacy divide that studies different uses of language, spoken and written, in their sociocultural contexts. However, there is one major factor that keeps literacy as a personal cognitive skill, apart from any cultural context, in focus: the claim that literacy leads to higher-order cognitive skills.

This claim is founded on a large number of empirical studies that go back to the famous work of Vygotsky and Luria in Soviet Central Asia in the 1930s (Luria 1976; see also Wertsch 1985). Soviet Central Asia in the 1930s was in the midst of collectivization and many previously nonliterate populations were rapidly introduced to literacy and other practices and skills of modern technological society. Vygotsky and Luria compared nonliterate and recently literate subjects on a series of reasoning tasks. The tasks required them to do such things as categorize familiar objects or deduce the conclusion that follows from the premises of a syllogism.

For example, in one task subjects were given pictures of a hammer, a saw, a log, and a hatchet and asked to say which three go together. Literate subjects were generally willing to say that the hammer, hatchet, and saw go together because they are all tools, thus grouping the objects on the basis of abstract word meanings. In contrast, the answers of nonliterate subjects indicated a strong tendency to group items on the basis of concrete settings with which they were familiar (saw, logs, hatchet). Thus they said things like "the log has to be here too," and resisted suggestions by the experimenter (based on decontextualized word meanings) that the hammer, hatchet, and saw could be grouped together. Performance on syllogistic reasoning tasks yielded analogous results.

It was concluded that major differences exist between literate and nonliterate subjects in their use of abstract reasoning processes. The

responses of nonliterate were dominated by their immediate practical experience and they resisted using language in a decontextualized manner. These results, of course, fit well with the claims of Havelock, Goody, and Ong, as well as with claims made about semi-literate groups in the United States and Britain.

However, there is a major empirical problem in the Vygotsky-Luria work. It is unclear whether the results were caused by "the ability to write and/or read" ("literacy" in the traditional sense), or by schooling, or even the new social institutions to which the Russian revolution exposed these subjects. It is extremely difficult to separate the influence of literacy as "reading and writing" from that of formal schooling, since in most parts of the world the two go together. But school involves much more than becoming literate in the traditional sense: "A student is involved in learning a set of complex role relationships, general cognitive techniques, ways of approaching problems, different genres of talk and interaction, and an intricate set of values concerned with communication, interaction, and society as a whole . . ." (Wertsch 1985: 35-36).

The whole question of the cognitive effects of literacy (defined as the "ability to write and read") was redefined by the ground-breaking work on the Vai in Liberia by Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1981) in *The Psychology of Literacy*, mentioned in the last chapter. Scribner and Cole examine two crucial questions: Is it literacy or formal schooling that affects mental functioning? Can one distinguish among the effects of forms of literacy used for different functions in the life of an individual or a society?

Among the Vai, literacy and schooling are not always coterminous. In addition to literacy in English acquired in formal school settings, the Vai have an indigenous (syllabic, not alphabetic) script transmitted outside an institutional setting and with no connection with Western-style schooling, as well as a form of literacy in Arabic.

Each of these literacies is tied to a particular set of uses: English literacy is associated with government and education; Vai literacy is used primarily for keeping records and for letters, many of them involving commercial matters; Arabic literacy is used for reading, writing, and memorizing the Koran. (Many Arabic literates do not know Arabic, but have memorized and can recite large sections of the Koran in Arabic.)

Since some Vai are versed in only one of these forms of literacy, others in two or more, and still others are nonliterate altogether, Scribner and Cole could disentangle various effects of literacy from effects of formal schooling, which affected only the English literates. If literacy